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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000104

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [GB](#)
SUBJECT: GABON: DEATH OF FIRST LADY EDITH BONGO
REF: LIBREVILLE 0052

Classified By: DCM Nate Holt for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (U) Gabon has announced an indefinite mourning period for Edith Bongo Ondimba, the wife of Gabonese President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba and the daughter of Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) President Denis Sassou-Nguesso. Edith Bongo died March 14 in Rabat, Morocco, after a protracted but undisclosed illness. Embassy is grateful for the Department's assistance in seeking an appropriate POTUS condolence letter. End Summary.

Mysterious Illness

¶2. (U) Edith Bongo's death March 14 in Rabat came shortly after Presidents Bongo and Sassou-Nguesso returned from almost a month at her bedside. Edith Bongo had been sick for over two years and was last seen in public in December 2006. Mrs. Bongo was 45. She and President Bongo had two children, a boy and a girl, both minors being educated in Europe.

¶3. (C) The reasons for Edith Bongo's sickness have never been publicly disclosed. The best available information suggests she had some kind of stroke. Her condition apparently took a significant turn for the worse in February (reftel), prompting both her husband and her father to rush to Rabat, where she had been hospitalized. Though scientifically implausible, many in Gabon credit rumors that she was the victim of witchcraft.

National Mourning. and Uncertainty
Over Funeral Arrangements

¶4. (C) Hours after Mrs. Bongo's demise, a harried government spokesman appeared on national television to announce that the nation would be in mourning until the conclusion of Mrs. Bongo's funeral services. Minister of Defense Ali Bongo, President Bongo's son by a former marriage, appears to be playing a key role in coordinating government affairs and in making funeral and other arrangements.

¶5. (C) The date and location of Mrs. Bongo's funeral, and her place of interment, have not yet been publicly disclosed. Sources close to the Bongo family state that there have been conflicts between the Bongos and the family of Congo (Brazzaville) President Sassou-Nguesso during Mrs. Bongo's long illness. These conflicts reportedly continued and intensified during Mrs. Bongo's last weeks, when both presidents were at her side in Morocco. Bongo family sources say that President Sassou-Nguesso had agreed that Mrs. Bongo could be buried in Gabon, but that Mrs. Bongo's mother continued to insist on burial in Congo (Brazzaville).

¶16. (C) President Bongo, clearly grief-stricken, appeared on national television a few hours after he had learned of his wife's passing. Bongo was pictured receiving condolences from ministers and other dignitaries, but did not speak. He departed in the early morning hours of March 15 for Rabat. Though Bongo has had many relationships and fathered many children, those close to the President say Edith Bongo was clearly first in his affections. They also point out that Bongo has aged visibly and grown more "tired" since his wife's illness.

Legacy of Good Works and
Large Property Holdings

¶17. (C) Edith Bongo will be remembered in Gabon for her work on behalf of the handicapped and victims of HIV/AIDS. She also proved to be a popular and effective campaigner for her husband in the 2005 presidential election. Mrs. Bongo also acquired great wealth as first lady, with significant property holdings in both Gabon and France. The disposition of this property could be a source of contention both within the complex Bongo family, and between the Bongos and the Sassou-Nguessos.

¶18. (U) On March 16, the state-owned newspaper l'Union published an unusually personal note from French President Nicolas Sarkozy offering Bongo "profound sympathy more as a friend than a Head of State." Embassy Libreville understands that the Department is working to obtain a message of

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condolence from POTUS, which will be very well received. Bongo is Africa's longest-serving head of state.
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